

Uni NEWS

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October 2021



RACHEL FEWSTER

Love of nature and statistics
adds up to rewarding career

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SURVIVOR STORIES TOLD

Student Irene Chapple teams up with Professor Annie Goldson for two inspiring local documentaries

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STANDING UP FOR EQUITY

Professor Cathy Stinear talks about her approach to her new role as Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity

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MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Doctoral student John Middleton explains why he's keen to help save the endangered Tokelau language

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Just a few of the University of Auckland staff and student achievements in the media recently. Email your link (not opinion pieces) to uninews@auckland.ac.nz

CHILDHOOD IMMUNISATION CRISIS

Dr Owen Sinclair, one of only seven Māori paediatricians in the country, has sounded the alarm on declining childhood immunisation rates. His research with Professor Cameron Grant (Department of Paediatrics) shows that the levels for completion of six-month immunisations has dropped from a meagre high of 70 percent in 2015, to a concerning level of 54 percent in June 2021. Owen told RNZ that a Māori health authority can't come fast enough.

Link: tinyurl.com/RNZ-Owen-Sinclair



COVID RISK FOR CHILDREN

Associate Professor Andrew Sporle (Statistics) told Māori TV that with 25 percent of the Māori population aged under 12, it was vital they too were vaccinated. "The primary issue is that even with vaccination, such a large proportion of our population can't get vaccinated because they're too young." Overseas trials are still under way to test vaccine safety in younger children.

Link: tinyurl.com/Andrew-Sporle-MTV



SOLVING THE NURSING SHORTAGE

Dr Julia Slark, head of the School of Nursing, told *Stuff* that extra financial support for nursing students could be part of solving the nation's critical nursing shortage. She said one of the biggest reasons for nursing students to drop out of training was because of hardship. "They just can't afford to pay the fees."

Link: tinyurl.com/Julia-Slark-Stuff



FLOODS DOWN TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Associate Professor Asaad Shamseldin (Civil and Environmental Engineering) talked to NewsTalk ZB about the August floods in West Auckland. Asaad says planning for climate change-induced weather events is needed and mitigation measures should include river stopbanks and raising floor levels. He also spoke to bFM and TVNZ about the West Coast floods.

Links: tinyurl.com/Asaad-bFM and tinyurl.com/Assad-TVNZ

FOOTPATHS FOR FEET

Dr Timothy Welch (pictured) from the School of Architecture and Planning talked to *RNZ Nights* about whether bikes and e-scooters should be allowed on footpaths. The conversation arose in response to Living Streets Aotearoa's campaign to have e-scooters and bicycles removed from footpaths for pedestrian safety.

Link: tinyurl.com/RNZ-Welch-paths



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DID YOU KNOW?

Everything you need to know about how the Covid-19 alert levels affect the University can be found in a dedicated area on the staff intranet.

See: staff.auckland.ac.nz/en/covid-19.html

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Scenes from the whaling town of Ayukawa.



ELAM TALENT HOPES TO OPEN EYES WITH **JAPANESE DOCO**

Ben Goldson talks to two Elam film-makers about their whaling documentary filmed in Japan.

It's good to have something to look forward to and events like Whānau Mārama, the New Zealand International Film Festival, need our support – whether that be in the cinema in 2021 or online.

The festival runs from 28 October to 14 November and includes the premiere of a documentary co-directed by Associate Professor Jim Speers (Elam, Faculty of Creative Arts and Industries) and Tu Rapana Neill (Elam alumnus).

Ayukawa: The Weight of a Life is named after the small town that's the subject of the film. The project was first conceived in 2015, as the residents of Ayukawa faced the decline of the whaling industry as well as the lasting impact of the devastating 2011 earthquake that struck the east coast of Japan.

"It's our first feature-length documentary project for both of us," says Jim, who started out as a sculptor before moving into video. "I've previously worked on projects that have resulted in video installations for art galleries. The difference here is the film's duration and how people are likely to experience the story. We focused on the thoughts of our subjects. Communicating their position to an audience was the priority."

Tu has worked in Japan previously, making music documentaries. "I told Jim I'd been thinking about making a film on whaling. It's a subject we feel passionate about in New Zealand, but I didn't know much about it."

Prior to filming, Tu and Jim met with Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to outline why they were travelling to Ayukawa. "We realised quite early on that we would have to meet

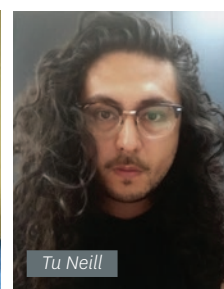
the Ministry and explain our intentions – that we didn't want to make an explicitly anti-whaling film, but we also weren't making a pro-whaling film," says Tu. "It was really just about this town and trying to give a Western audience an insight into something we don't often see."

Jim and Tu, son of Emeritus Professor Michael Neill, met at Elam more than a decade ago and had already worked together in China as part of the Field Recordings collective. Their initial intention was to create a broader piece about whaling in Japan before deciding on one location, Ayukawa.

Jim received a research grant from the University and the pair were joined by another Elam graduate, Kentarō Yamada, who co-wrote and co-produced *Ayukawa*. Filming began in 2018 and was completed in 2020 after a number of visits. Having gained intimate access to Ayukawa



Jim Speers



Tu Neill

Stylistically, the documentary is shot in an observational format. Tu says it was important to put the stories of their subjects first, as opposed to the personal opinions of the film-makers.

"I was interested in the subject, not how I perceived the subject. What I think about whaling is far less interesting than how the people living there feel about it. We let them tell their story."

"They're cognisant of the fact that there isn't a demand for the product ... that conditions have changed."

– Associate Professor Jim Speers, co-director of *Ayukawa*

and its residents, Jim and Tu express hope that their documentary will move the conversation away from attempting to shame the Japanese people into ceasing their whaling operations.

The pair learned a lot about the history of Japanese whaling while filming. An Ayukawa resident they interviewed estimated 80 percent of the town was at one point reliant on whaling.

"But they recognise the industry's not coming back," says Jim. "They're cognisant of the fact that there isn't a demand for the product, and that conditions have changed."

"The situation post-war that led to the boom in whaling no longer applies and yet it continues. Our film aims to understand why."

Jim says the observational nature of the film, which centres on the townspeople, also reflects the film-makers' place as outsiders in Ayukawa.

"You make the film based on the information you have," he says. "What that involved for us was just trying to observe what occurred in that place, and talking to people. We would finish an interview with someone and we'd ask, 'who's the best person to talk to about Ayukawa in the post-war years', and they would suggest someone else."

■ *Ayukawa* (Japanese with English subtitles): NZ International Film Festival, 28 Oct – 14 Nov. Details at nziff.co.nz. See the trailer: vimeo.com/412287261
Turn to page 10 for another film by University of Auckland film-makers screening in the NZIFF.

GOOD TO KNOW

CATHY STINEAR'S NEW ROLE

The new Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity, Professor Cathy Stinear, says awareness of equity should be second nature at the University.

"Equity needs to be embedded in all of our work, rather than only thought about and done by people with 'equity' in their job title."

Cathy is taking over from Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity Prue Toft at an important time.

"It's a very exciting time to shape this role and to be guided by *Taumata Teitei* and the recent Equity Review," Cathy says. "Part of the role will involve responding to the review's recommendations, working across the major work streams emerging from *Taumata Teitei* to link up the University's equity efforts, so they are coordinated and coherent and effective."

She believes there is a high level of motivation among students and staff to create a safe and equitable University community where everyone is free to be themselves. Cathy's new role is part-time and she will continue her work as a clinical neuroscientist, leading a team of stroke researchers based in Auckland City Hospital.



The review of Equity led to a move away from a centralised office to accountability for equity in roles across the University, with leadership from a committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor.

Equity groups include Pacific peoples, people with disabilities, from low socioeconomic or refugee backgrounds, the Rainbow community and others who may face barriers to success.

As Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity, Cathy will be supported by policy advisers and an Equity Manager. There will also be a Student Equity Manager in Campus Life and Associate Director of Staff Equity and Staff Equity Manager, both in HR.

Cathy's background is in allied health, where

equity is a key component. Her lived experience of equity includes working with people with disabilities following strokes, and being a woman in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine). "I haven't had 'equity' in the title of my roles or responsibilities. However, I approach all of my work in teaching, learning and service from an equity perspective, to promote equitable successes for learners, people with neurological conditions and fellow colleagues," she says. "That embodies what the University is striving for – that equity is embedded in all of our work."

■ Jodi Yeats

GREAT BIRTHDAY FOR ANNA STEVEN

Paralympian Anna Steven set a new Oceania record at the Paralympics Games in Tokyo.

Anna, who is doing a Bachelor of Science, was making her debut at the Paralympics, and competed in the T64 200m and T64 100m sprints. She only began running competitively in 2016 when she was 16.

"It was pretty surreal, especially since I started athletics less than five years ago," she says.

"I experienced a full spectrum of emotions, but overall I'd say it was an awesome opportunity to further my development as an athlete."

Anna did well from the get-go securing a spot in the T64 200m final, her preferred event.

"That was the highlight of the Games for me, running a new Oceania record and making the 200m final on my birthday," she says.

However after running the race of her life in the

heat, Anna placed eighth in the T64 200m final.

She then had to lift herself for the 100m event. Anna found it tougher in the 100m heat and was unfortunately disqualified after a false start.

"I've taken it as motivation to work harder and prove myself in future competitions. I knew there was always a risk that could happen and I'm pretty gutted it did, but I've chosen to focus more on the positive experiences I had at the Games in my main event, the 200m."

She says she advises other athletes facing similar upsets to keep their chin up.

"Everyone will experience adversity of some kind along the way, but I think the most important part is how you respond to it."

She says it was tough for athletes not to have family and friends there for support, but Anna says technology helped. "My family and friends had a big group call after my 200m heat and before the final and regularly through the Games."

Back in New Zealand in MIQ, Anna started planning her sporting future. "My events aren't part of the 2022 Commonwealth Games so my main goals for the next three years are the 2022 and 2023 World Champs and the 2024 Paralympics in Paris."

And that science degree, of course.

■ Full story: auckland.ac.nz/anna-steven-paralympian



\$24M FOR ENDEAVOURS

Technology to wirelessly power heavy commercial vehicles quickly and on the move will be the game changer for switching freight fleets to electricity.

Research by the Faculty of Engineering into developing vehicle-side and in-road charging technology needed to meet this challenge has been awarded \$13.5m by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's (MBIE) Endeavour Fund. The funding will keep up the momentum of the University's work in this area which is internationally recognised, explains research leader, Professor Grant Covic. "It means we can focus on removing the huge EV barriers for commercial fleet owners which are the time it takes for plug-in charging and the size and weight of the battery packs needed to power heavy loads and long-distance travel. It's what fleet owners need if they have any chance of meeting Climate Change Commission advice to switch to electricity by 2035," he adds.

In total, 12 research teams around the University were awarded \$24m in funding by MBIE. Other Engineering projects include Dr Jenny Malmström's work developing biodegradable tags – specifically radio frequency

identification (RFID) tags. Dr Enrique del Rey Castillo and team won funding to research seismic strengthening of floors using carbon-fibre materials.

Heart care is also in the money. Dr Daniel McCormick, from the Implantable Devices Group at the Auckland Bioengineering Institute (ABI) and Dr Jesse Ashton, Research Fellow with the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (FMHS) and the ABI, received funding for development of implantable medical devices called 'electroceuticals' that stimulate or block neural activity to treat heart disease.



Professor Grant Covic



Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris

VACCINE EXPERT IN THE RUNNING FOR GLOBAL AWARD

Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris is in the running for an award for researchers tackling the world's biggest problems.

She's been shortlisted for the 2021 Nature Research Award for Driving Global Impact for her work on vaccine safety and effectiveness.

Prominent in New Zealand's pandemic response, in 2019 Helen helped set up an international network for monitoring the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. Watching over Covid-19 vaccines is now a key task for the Global Vaccine Data Network (GVDN). She's co-director of the network, which is run by UniServices out of the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences.

Eight early-career researchers from around the world are in the running for the award for tackling challenges such as pollution, nutrition problems and biodiversity loss. The award is from research publisher Springer Nature, and the winner will be announced in November.

DIETITIAN'S EXCELLENCE NOTED

Professor Clare Wall (Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences) has been recognised in her field with the Dietitians NZ Award of Excellence for outstanding achievement.

Over her 37 years as a dietitian, Clare has played a pivotal role in the profile of dietetics in Aotearoa. She has been head of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics since 2012 and was the driving force behind the development of the

University's Dietetic Training Programme that began in 2013. Clare's research interest is early life nutrition and she is a world expert in this area.

Two students were also recognised. MHSc student Maia Lingman won the Bernice Kelly Award (most improved dietetic student), and Hannah Rapata, a PhD candidate researching Māori health equity in public health nutrition, won the ANA Public Health Nutrition Scholarship.



Professor Clare Wall

CLIMBING HIGH

The University of Auckland has continued to improve its world ranking.

Auckland has climbed to 137th equal in the latest Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, up from 147th equal in 2020. This is the highest any university in Aotearoa New Zealand has ranked since THE first published rankings independently in 2010.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater says she is heartened by the way the University continues to perform internationally, particularly considering the challenges created by the Covid pandemic over the past 18 months. "Maintaining and improving our internationally recognised levels of education and research despite the uncertainties of the current environment, and at the same time positioning the University for a post-Covid reality, has been no mean feat."



The northern hairy-nosed wombat, seen here in Epping Forest, Queensland, has a face worth saving. Photo: Graham Lee

SAVING LIVES USING STATISTICS

Rachel Fewster says statistics and wildlife add up to a rewarding career.

When Professor Rachel Fewster was on sabbatical during lockdown last year, her research took her on virtual travels.

“One day I was doing statistical analysis for four different projects. There were Bryde’s whales in the Hauraki Gulf, the northern hairy-nosed wombat in Queensland, manta rays in Indonesia and gibbons in Cambodia.

“I got a bit suspicious, so I looked on Google Earth and worked out that from the whales to the wombats the distance was 3,000 kilometres, and from the wombats to the manta rays was 3,000 kilometres. From the manta rays to the gibbons was around the same. I’d made it halfway round the world, all without leaving the house.”

She’s a statistician, so you’ll have to trust the calculations, but why would a statistician be researching creatures all over the world?

That’s a long and lovely story.

“I’ve always been interested in wildlife,” says Rachel, who grew up in Durham in the northeast of England. “I was switched on to it from around age six or seven. We didn’t have a car so I was a garden naturalist ... climbing trees looking for ants! By the time I was 10, I was bird-mad and spent my free time reading nature books and drawing birds.”

Her parents were history academics, coming from a time when you had to choose between arts and science. Rachel leaned towards science but pursued maths, partly due to sibling rivalry.

“I did maths at university because I had a big brother and I was very competitive at that age. We’re all influenced by family and siblings – I have three and I’m the youngest. My brother got a lot of attention from teachers and then went to Cambridge to do maths. I wanted to keep up with him and prove myself. To be fair, I did love maths.”

While doing her MA in maths at Cambridge, she started to wonder how she would use her maths

knowledge. “Although I loved it, I couldn’t see myself living with abstraction for my whole life. I wanted to do something a bit more ‘real world.’”

She came across a way of combining her two loves, nature and maths.

And the way this came about is another story. While she was still studying, at one point Rachel was volunteering for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on a nature reserve in Scotland.

“One day when I was there, we went over to a little island in the Firth of Forth, near Edinburgh, to do conservation work. On the way back, the driver said, ‘If you just go up that way, that’s St Andrews – you might want to visit the town on your day off.’”

Rachel did just that and then, steeled by the naivety of youth, she popped into the University of St Andrews, “to see if they were doing anything that I might be interested in for a PhD”.

“I literally walked off the street into the maths department and said, ‘Hello. I’d like to do a PhD. But what do you do here?’ They were a bit taken aback, but they gave me some information about the sort of research topics they did.”

What Rachel didn’t know was that there was a group of researchers at St Andrews doing exactly what Rachel had dreamt of doing.

“They were using statistics to study natural wildlife populations. I ended up doing my PhD with Professor Steve Buckland there, a world expert in the field.

“So I landed by chance in an area that was really about to take off – statistics and data science. My specialty, the wildlife technology field, has really burgeoned over the past ten years and it’s such an exciting area in which to be working.”

It was the kākāpō that originally attracted Rachel to New Zealand, in a roundabout way.

“In my third year at Cambridge, a friend and I wanted to do something exciting and decided to go to Australia, but I’d read Douglas Adams’s book *Last Chance to See*. It has a fantastic chapter about New Zealand and the kākāpō. So I had that

in my mind and thought we might ‘pop over.’”

In the end they bypassed Australia and chose New Zealand because of the convenience of being able to travel to its different highlights quickly. The 21-year-olds embarked on the Kiwi Experience, before Rachel headed back to the UK for the PhD at St Andrews. Nearing the end of her PhD, she went to a conference in Australia where she met some New Zealanders and ended up talking about a job advertised in the statistics department at Auckland. When they told her the classes were 300-strong, she was daunted. There’s quite a story behind her application too, but the short version is that in 1999, and somewhat by accident, she got the job and arrived to teach statistics at the University of Auckland.

“It was a shock, I had a huge, to me, stage-one statistics class. The students’ English language levels were quite a bit lower than they are today so communication could be a challenge. But the teaching team led by Matt Regan was incredibly supportive and welcoming. I always felt they valued my input, despite my new-fangled and, quite frankly, often ridiculous ideas about how things should be taught.

“That stage one stats team was one of the best and most collegial teams I’ve ever experienced. It won a National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award in 2003, for excellence in collaboration.”

Rachel also won a national award for Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching in 2009, and the NZ Statistical Association’s Campbell Award in 2018. Her enthusiasm for her subject blows the stereotype of the crusty mathematician out of the water and has been described as the “Fewster effect”. Her love of subject exudes from her inaugural lecture – if you want to be fascinated, educated and amused it’s on YouTube.

In it, Rachel touches on one serious note, that she alludes to in our interview as well. It’s the business of becoming a professor and how the prerequisites (all science academics must publish 80 papers) don’t fit with all fields of research. She was rejected twice for professorship at Auckland before being offered a chair at a high-ranking university overseas, which seemed to propel the wheels of promotion at Auckland in a more favourable direction. “I’m not a fan of the current promotion procedures. They’re off kilter in terms of catering to different subject areas and I hope that’s something that can be addressed.

“My research profile is so different from the rule book and there will be other people like me. To retain good staff in New Zealand universities, I think we should be looking at more flexible pathways. What is happening is that it shuts out a certain sector of people who do very high-quality, innovative work, but don’t have fast throughput.”

Rachel is working on three Marsden-funded projects, and is the principal investigator on two of

those. One involves remote sampling of birds like kiwi using microphones, spaced a certain distance apart to pick up their calls. It's not as simple as it sounds, but the team is making good progress and using a similar methodology to estimate population numbers in bats, ruru and even fish.

She says monitoring bird sounds, no matter what measure you use, can be fraught. "Some populations of kiwi have little recorders fixed to their collars. But even then you can't be absolutely sure it's *that* bird that's yelling, and not another one. They could be standing next to each other."

And then she shatters the image of the 'cute little kiwi' most of us have etched in our minds.

"Kiwi are very aggressive birds. They can't abide each other. They're *furios* with each other!"

You don't want to worsen their mood when monitoring them. "As statisticians, what we love to be able to do is use non-intrusive methods that don't create stress."

She says they also have volunteers listening for kiwi bird calls. The quiet of lockdowns doesn't need to impact that research, nor does the fact the volunteer might be going a bit deaf.

That's because a statistician's role is to devise ways to count what they can't see or hear.

"For every animal you see or hear, you simultaneously collect information about the chance you missed it," says Rachel. "It's the way the whole statistical framework operates. It doesn't matter if you hear more birds in lockdown. The maths sorts it out."

Other statistical analysis she's involved in is with whales. As well as the Bryde's whales, she's helping with research on the New Zealand tohorā (southern right whale) population, analysing data supplied by the Tohorā Research Team. Its 2020 research trip to the Subantarctic Auckland Islands, led by Dr Emma Carroll with Associate Professor Rochelle Constantine (Biological Sciences), has provided a wealth of population data.

With whales, if surveyors get lucky they can get a photograph that will identify the whale. Alternatively they might obtain a DNA sample through a painless dart. "But that can be difficult, and requires researchers to reinvent themselves as sharpshooters. Plus, if there's more than one whale around, you can't be 100 percent sure your dart has hit the one you thought it did."

Still, the visual identification of whales has led to a bit of fun for the surveyors whose work is a mix of mathematical formulae and statistical probability. The tohorā researchers now know one whale by distinctive protrusions on its back, so that whale has been named Knobbly-Back. Another with a zig-zag white pigmentation has been named Harry, as in Harry Potter who has a scar on his forehead. Logically, other whales have become Ron and Hermione.

Rachel's other statistical work includes the

"Stoats are the nastiest predator out there, in terms of being both numerous and vicious killing machines."

– Professor Rachel Fewster,
Faculty of Science



Professor Rachel Fewster. Photo: Billy Wong

northern hairy-nosed wombat in Queensland. With the wombats, and the aforementioned gibbons and manta rays, she is sent the data from afar and applies her statistical analytical skills.

"The northern hairy-nosed wombat is one of my favourite projects. It's one of the world's rarest land mammals. They only live in one reserve in Queensland, but some have now been translocated to another reserve and we reckon we've just made it to 300 wombats."

Despite all the interesting research data she is sent, Rachel still enjoys her core role – making statistics more engaging to students. This year she has enjoyed developing a new capstone course.

"Students work in teams and we set them mini-project challenges, each lasting a week. And we're seeing incredible results where students develop their independence, their initiative, their teamwork, their collegiality. It's so rewarding.

"It's a great way to develop students and expose them to different modes of statistical communication. For example, we might say, 'your audience this week is the Minister of Police, or this week it's high-school students'. It's great for them to think about how they need to communicate differently to different audiences."

Speaking of different audiences, Rachel is the driving force behind CatchIT, a data and analysis tool for community conservation projects. A small team of students and staff run the project and there's also a CatchIT Schools programme. She says communities are crucial in controlling rats,

possums and stoats, trapping these whenever possible. But rats can swim, so pest-free islands can be quickly overrun.

"Stoats swim too. Stoats are the nastiest predator out there, in terms of being both numerous and vicious killing machines. They're the number one enemy."

Somehow a stoat, or more than one, has found its way to Motutapu Island.

"We don't know how, and we don't know how many are there," says Rachel. "DOC did catch a couple of males in 2020 but droppings show us that there's at least one more."

It will be worse news if that stoat is female.

"Female stoats are always pregnant, because of their unique embryo development. Male stoats will impregnate even a baby stoat when it's a tiny nestling, and the fertilised embryos can implant many months later. So if a female stoat gets to Motutapu, it's really bad news. They have to be trapped or detected by dogs. It's not easy."

She says the best guess for the origin of the stoats is from the Tāmaki River, or alternatively Takapuna or Devonport. "We think they're swimming or being swept by floodwaters."

Now there's a push to get stoat samples from around Auckland to see if researchers can nail down the origin of the stoats and how they've ended up on the island using clues in the DNA. Covid-19 isn't the only thing that needs eliminating in New Zealand.

■ Denise Montgomery



Joe Standen delivered the goods when making his random connection.

TALKING ABOUT TOKELAUAN

Although doctoral student John Middleton doesn't speak Tokelauan, he's keen to ensure others do.

The Tokelauan language is on UNESCO's list of the world's severely endangered languages.

Part of the reason for that is there are only approximately 1,500 Tokelauans living on the Pacific Island's three atolls – Atafu, Fakaofu and Nukunono – but about 9,000 Tokelauans living in New Zealand. Of those 9,000, only around 2,500 speak fluent Tokelauan.

PhD candidate John Middleton (Linguistics, Faculty of Arts) is among those hoping the language will survive – especially as he is studying it for his doctorate. John's field is syntax, an arm of linguistics that looks at how words and phrases are arranged in sentences to form a language. The reason he's so interested in Tokelauan is that the word order can be quite different from English and even other Pacific Island languages.

"Even though I don't actually speak it, I'm interested in the language's preservation as well as the socio-political aspects."

For example, the impact of climate change on the atolls may see more Tokelauans come to New Zealand. When they do, words to describe things they see in their homeland can change or be lost.

"This is the difficulty with minority languages in a country where other languages are spoken. You tend to lose the language unless there's constant use at home or in the community."

He says with Tokelau immersion pre-schools in Wellington and Auckland, there's a growing realisation by the Tokelauan community that language is a treasure to be saved.

"You wouldn't just say, 'Oh well, look at all these rhinoceroses becoming extinct'. You would try to save them, wouldn't you?"

John is working with consultants on his PhD, people who speak Tokelauan, either fluently or otherwise. His key source of information about the language's structure comes from his work with Iutana Pue, a minister of the church in Auckland who is passionate about saving the language.

"Consultants aren't necessarily academic people, they just have to be language speakers," explains John. "You get people who have a strong interest in the language and people who don't really care but they're just as useful, because all that matters is that you're getting these native speaker judgements."

John says in his research – looking at language

DATES WITH DOUGHNUTS

A quirky online bot can help you widen your contacts.

Along came Joe. He didn't recognise me and I didn't recognise him because we'd met on the internet where our faces were represented by emojis – he was a retro comic-book guy and I was a cat in a mask.

We'd both decided to try out an innovation on the University's Slack channel – in which you meet someone you haven't encountered before at the University – it seemed like a cool thing to do.

A bot called Donut (spelled the American way) had introduced us on Slack, and if you're not understanding any of this, maybe this type of networking isn't for you.

Joe brought doughnuts to reflect the eponymous new-fangled bot and then it was down to chatting in real life. Remember that?

It was early August. Joe was visiting the City Campus from Newmarket where he works in digital strategy and architecture. His official title is manager, identity and access management.

He is not actually retro comic-book guy in real life. This despite the fact Joe's job is to make sure people's identities are bona fide and they are represented as they want to be in the University system. Something I find funny is that I can't find Joe on the Intranet. If you're not on the Intranet do you even exist? (Turns out yes, but Joe's profile can't be found through the public search.)

"Whenever anybody joins the University as a

student, staff member, contractor, or whoever, their digital identity gets created. That's the UPI username and password and also two-factor authentication."

"Tell me you're not responsible for two-factor authentication, Joe," I say.

"It's important!" he says. I retract my claws.

It turns out the University has more than 60,000 active users with UPIs and it needs to know they are who they say they are when they log in.

"Also, about the UPI system. You can't just have any UPI," explains Joe.

Mine is the slightly demonic DMon013.

"Spare a thought for Sarah Hitchcock," says Joe, as he takes a bite of doughnut. "Or Fred Uckerman. Those are UPIs we'd intervene on."

Luckily the bot that creates UPIs follows rules that prevent particular combinations. But what happens if people want to change their UPI? What if they have an ex- 'partner for life' who turned out not to be, and whose moniker they now want to shred along with all of their belongings?

"If a person says their previous name is traumatic, we could. But if Jane Smith gets married and wants to be Jane Bloggs, we won't change the UPI. But sometimes there's an issue we may not have spotted, such as a person's UPI meaning something rude in their language."

If a person transitions, that can also be a reason. "Gender transition shouldn't be an exceptional reason," says Joe. "They should be able to say 'this is my reasoning' and we do it. We're getting there."

More about Joe. He came from Watercare in May 2019 and had previously been in the Navy for five years. His manager is John Pye, director of digital strategy and architecture.

"People don't realise identity is associated with all the products they use. It has to be running 24/7. You wouldn't think of your login as a service that needs to be maintained but there are a stack of applications and a great team behind it." – Denise Montgomery

■ If you're interested, join Slack and search for @donut to find the post by Connect's Amanda Schreyer. Sign up and the bot will book a meet-up!





John Middleton says all languages are treasures to be saved. Photo: Billy Wong

structure – it isn't vital that you speak the language, although obviously it would be helpful.

"I would love to put in the time to learn a language other than English but I am doing my PhD and teaching linguistics as a graduate teaching assistant."

He says Samoan would have the closest structure when you compare languages, but there are big differences. "The boat ride from Samoa is about 500km and takes about 24 hours. So they are close but not close. When you get into the nitty-gritty of the two languages, you see they are very different."

John's research has seen him explore the syntax of other languages too, including Bieria, spoken by only around 25 people in Vanuatu, and the extinct language Moriori in the Chatham Islands. He has planned a research trip to the Chatham's to coincide with his mother taking up a role as a locum doctor there early next year.

John, 26, came to New Zealand with his family when he was eight, from Leicester in the UK. He grew up in Motueka, near Nelson.

"We had transferred here because my family got sick of the life and traffic in England and they took a punt. It was meant to be for a year!"

He went to Motueka High School and then headed to Auckland, completing an anthropology degree with a minor in linguistics.

"I got a bit tired of uni after that and went off and sold toasters at Smith & Caughey's. Mum loved it – we could talk about toasters."

When he returned to the University, he had to choose. "Linguistics got me interested because of the scientific and sometimes mathematical nature of it. The fact that if you did an experiment, you either came out with this or that, there was no fudging anything because you're using data.

"You wouldn't just say, 'Oh well, look at all the rhinoceroses becoming extinct'. You would try to save them, wouldn't you?"

"After I finished my honours degree I realised that here we are, sitting in this amazing place in the South Pacific with interesting languages all around. I was also aware there hadn't been a pile of linguistic research into Tokelauan in the past 20 years, and that's an important time period."

With Tokelau speakers in Auckland and Wellington, his fieldwork is relatively easy, when Covid-19 alert levels allow. But he is eyeing a visit to Tokelau when he can travel again.

"Obviously I need to go with a Tokelau speaker to the atolls. It would mean a chance to work with speakers there to look at what they have collected of the language. It's a really interesting language full of idiosyncrasies.

"Take the sentence in English 'John didn't eat the pies'. In English we can add emphasis to certain words, and it changes the meaning. So for example, if we said '*John* didn't eat the pies', it would imply someone else did. Or 'John didn't eat the *pies*', it implies he ate something else. We can stress a word to create a change in meaning.

"In Tokelauan, they have that ability, but also have an extra ability to move the word to a position just past the verb, and it does exactly the same thing. So if they wanted to focus on John, they would put him directly after the verb eat. So it'd be 'eat John pies'. The movement of a word is a really interesting concept."

This time last year John was interviewed on RNZ after writing a piece for *Newsroom* to coincide with Tokelau Language Week. "I received some nice emails and responses from Tokelauans who

said it was good to promote the use of the language and to hear about it from an academic perspective, even though I'm not a speaker.

"Promoting the language and talking about its structure are very different, but it still makes us want to keep the language alive."

John also believes it's important for academics to let the general public know about their work, especially when there's an impact on society.

"There's so much research being done that we should be sharing it; we often receive public funding to do it."

He recently won recognition from the Polynesian Society, receiving a Bruce Biggs Scholarship for his work on the Tokelau language.

And while John is busy with the PhD and teaching, and a plan for a linguistics academic career, he hopes the end of 2021's lockdown will lead to some fun and games like it did in 2020.

Back then, he and two friends completed a cross-country tour of 85 mini-golf courses over a month, to raise money for the Mental Health Foundation, much needed post lockdown.

"It had been a bit of a random idea at first, but it was one we went through with, playing mini-golf from Invercargill to Kaitia. We ended up raising about \$8,000 which was nice."

■ Denise Montgomery

Tokelau Language Week, Te vaiaho o te gagana Tokelau 2021, is from Sunday 24 October to Saturday 30 October.

“David Downs is the central character, but there are others whose treatment we follow through, to be with them for the outcome.”

–Irene Chapple, co-producer, A Mild Touch of Cancer



Masters student Irene Chapple: her coursework led to a full-length documentary being made.

STUDENT AND TEACHER CREATE INSPIRING CANCER DOCUMENTARY

Irene Chapple and Professor Annie Goldson’s film is the story of David Downs and others who have received a life-saving immunotherapy cancer treatment.

Masters student Irene Chapple knows a good story when she hears one.

The experienced journalist, producer and PR strategist has already worked for CNN London, the *NZ Herald* and TV3’s *The Project*, among others. But it was her desire to make documentaries that drew her back to university.

“I wanted to upskill myself in the film side of things, particularly post-production.”

She was attracted to an honours paper run by multi-award-winning documentary filmmaker Professor Annie Goldson in Media, Film, and Television. As part of her coursework, Irene completed a short documentary *To Laugh To Live*, and the subject matter caught her teacher Annie’s eye. The film was about comedian, writer and businessman David Downs who, in 2017 aged 46, was diagnosed with advanced non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma cancer. After 12 rounds of chemotherapy, he was told he had a year to live.

Instead, he was given the chance to take part in a pioneering immunotherapy cancer treatment called CAR T-cell therapy in Boston, in the United States. A doctor had read the blogs David had written about his situation and contacted him.

Irene knew about David, who has a BSc from Auckland, because he lives in Devonport, the same suburb as her. She contacted him to see if he would take part in her documentary project.

“Friends had been talking to me about his miraculous survival story, so I approached him directly and just had a coffee with him. He’s a really kind person and was so willing to participate, even though it was a university project. The interview I did with him took hours.”

That might have been where it ended, with a great student doco about an incredible cancer

survival story. “Annie saw more in it. She was really interested in the science of CAR T-cell therapy and how it works. Also, David is such an incredible character, she could see a longer film.”

What happened next was a two-year project that began in 2019 and culminates in the feature-length documentary *A Mild Touch of Cancer*, named after David Downs’ book. One version will screen on Prime TV in October and a longer version is part of the New Zealand International Film Festival due to open on 28 October. It is also featuring in a New York City festival, Imagine Science, and has been picked up for global distribution.

A Mild Touch of Cancer is written, produced and directed by Annie through her company Occasional Productions, and co-produced by Irene. It had NZ On Air and Sky NZ support, and received a grant from the NZ Film Commission.

“It has been a long production process, but in many ways that time was required,” says Irene.

“While David is a central character, there are others whose journeys we follow right through, including their treatment with CAR T-cell therapy,

and we needed to be with them for the outcome. In a way, the film is like a longitudinal study.

“Annie drove the film and it was great to work alongside her as producer in New Zealand. She travelled to the US, to Pfizer in New York and to Boston, to film David’s return for his two-year scan after the therapy. We were lucky with the timing because it was early 2020, and it couldn’t have happened if it had been later in the year.”

That footage enabled the film to include the pronouncement by the cancer specialist that David was cured. Says Annie: “David was then determined to help others who didn’t have his ability to connect to the global science community. He found out that the Malaghan Institute in Wellington was running its own trials in CAR-T.

“David is phenomenal helping others with cancer,” says Annie. “He helps with advice, counselling, offers financial support when needed, and fundraising for Malaghan. His determination also gave us a way of structuring the film. Using David’s connections, we could follow the story of others undertaking treatment, in real time. None of us, including them, knew what their health outcomes would be while we were filming.”

Then in 2020, Irene made another documentary, debuting as director. *The Eruption: Stories of Survival* was about the deadly Whakaari White Island eruption in December 2019 and told the story of survivors and their families, first



Mile Nafatali with girlfriend Jade Scandrett-Huriwai. Mile’s story of undergoing CAR T-Cell therapy is also told in *A Mild Touch of Cancer*.

BOOKS



Fundraising for Car T-Cell Therapy treatments is now a big part of David Downs' life.

responders and medical staff and the family of one guide who didn't survive. Irene was freelancing at *The Project* when Whakaari happened.

"It's a compelling story, in terms of Mother Nature and our relationship with her. I immediately thought it would make a powerful film. I was not long out of Annie's course and it seemed an obvious opportunity to direct a feature about it."

She put forward the proposal to TV3 who supported it. And alongside her name in the credits of that documentary, which you can see on 3 Now (on demand), is Annie Goldson.

"I triggered the process of starting the feature and asked Annie to produce it with me and happily she said yes. We got other crew on board, and met with key people in Whakatane, including the leadership of Ngāti Awa. It was important to gain people's trust – many were very vulnerable – and I'm proud of how we worked with them.

"We were straight up and absolutely held to our word of doing what we said we would do. I believe we took care of people, and that was particularly important to us, especially with the two survivors we featured, Jake Milbank and Kelsey Waghorn."

Right now, Irene is juggling several projects – PR campaigns, media strategy and production work – with being the sole parent of a young daughter.

"My daughter is part of the reason I did Annie's course – I really wanted to upskill professionally so I could broaden my career, especially in the field of documentary," she says. "When I came back to New Zealand after eight years in London and a job I loved, I knew I needed to create a professional future that was satisfying, but also flexible."

The next part of that plan is to get back into her masters. "My masters has been on hold ... I had filming sorted for another project for it, but then lockdown happened again. It's a challenge, but I'll get there."

■ Denise Montgomery

A Mild Touch of Cancer, NZ International Film Festival, 28 October – 14 November.

Dates at: tinyurl.com/NZIFF-mild-touch

Trailer: nziff.co.nz/2021/film/a-mild-touch-of-cancer/

**Crazy Love**

Rosetta Allan is a graduate of the Master of Creative Writing programme and an award-winning poet and novelist. This is her third novel and is based on Rosetta's own experiences.

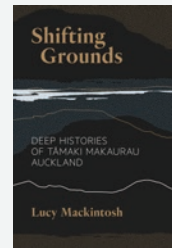
It explores how, as the Van Morrison song suggests, crazy love can take away your troubles. It can, though, add a whole lot more. The book was launched on the night NZ went into level four lockdown. See the video of the last hurrah for a while: tinyurl.com/crazy-love-book-launch
Rosetta Allan, Penguin, \$36

**Ten Acceptable Acts of Arson and Other Very Short Stories**

Stories by Jack Remiel Cottrell (Ngāti Rangī) are no more than 300 words long and run the gamut of sci-fi, fantasy, comedy, horror, literary realism

and romance, and everything in between. Jack's flash-fiction collection was awarded the Wallace Prize for best manuscript in the Master of Creative Writing class of 2020.

Jack Cottrell, Canterbury Uni Press, \$30

**Shifting Grounds: Deep Histories of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland**

Research undertaken during Dr Lucy Mackintosh's PhD at Auckland (2018) forms the basis of this illustrated book. *Shifting Grounds* is

an historical assessment of Tāmaki Makaurau and unearths the histories of three iconic landscapes, Pukekawa Auckland Domain, Maungakiekie One Tree Hill and the Ōtuataua Stonefields at Ihumātao.

Lucy Mackintosh, BWB, \$59.99

WIN: We have one copy of *Shifting Grounds* to give away. Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz by 31 October.

**Lawyers Beyond Borders**

Subtitled *Advancing International Human Rights Through Local Laws and Courts*, Dr Maria Armoudian, senior lecturer in politics and international relations, examines the work of lawyers who have taken on cases of

egregious human rights abuse around the world.

Maria Armoudian, University of Michigan Press, US\$25

■ See full story in te reo Māori and English at auckland.ac.nz/maria-armoudian-lawyers-book

WEB FRIENDS

Richard Smith from Media Productions had become weary of his fellow lockdown inmates and began to look elsewhere for engagement.

"I was so bored, I'd even taken to doing the dishes by hand instead of using the dishwasher as a form of relaxation and mindfulness," he says.

"Each time I did the dishes, I noticed a spider spinning a web on a pot plant on the windowsill in front of me. I started calling him Hector and we began to have a conversation over the dishes. He was always a little reticent in his replies but I took that to be him just being a little shy," says Richard.

Hector (pictured) was only about 3mm and Richard wondered what he might look like close up. He decided to use his old macro photography equipment that he hadn't used for over 50 years.

After adapting it to his new Fuji camera,

with a bit of ingenuity and gaffer tape, a movie was made that's become a celebration of his newfound 'flatmates' and friends. Be warned, if you're arachnophobic it may not be for you.

■ See the video: tinyurl.com/Richard-spider-man



“This ‘evidence’ of US unreliability, weakness and failure is partial, out of context, and lacking in historical perspective.” – Stephen Hoadley

NOT YET THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

Fifty years ago, as I began my teaching career at the University of Auckland, the United States began withdrawing its forces from the Republic of Vietnam.

Three years later that government fell to Ho Chi Minh's communist army and became part of the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Fifty years later, as I prepared to complete five decades of service to the University, the US withdrew its forces from the Republic of Afghanistan. Its rival, the Taliban, took over and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Its leaders immediately proclaimed China as its closest ally.

These were not isolated instances of US retreats. During my lifetime, the United States has been accused also of ‘losing’ Eastern Europe to Stalin at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, Czechoslovakia in 1948, China in 1949, Pakistan in 1951, Egypt and India in 1955, Cuba in 1959, Iran and Nicaragua in 1979, Kuwait in 1990, and Cambodia in 2018. To this list of governments rejecting cooperation with the US in recent years might be added Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Lebanon and Sri Lanka.

Other countries in Latin America and Africa slipped from the US sphere of influence for complex reasons. China's ability in the Belt and Road Initiative to lend vast sums for infrastructure projects in undemocratic countries is a cynical policy to gain influence, but it is working. The US is constitutionally, politically, and morally unable to duplicate it. In most of these cases either the Soviet Union, Russia, or China appeared to gain advantages at American expense.

Consequently, authoritarian regimes have

arisen to displace many of the democratic regimes that Washington has attempted to foster. The geopolitical balance appears to be tilting inexorably against Washington.

Is this record evidence of an unreliable ally and a failing hegemon? Is America's post-WWII stabilising and democratic leadership now on the decline around the world? Journalists, think-tank commentators and academics, and some national leaders like Tony Blair, have been critical. Many have branded the precipitous retreat from Afghanistan as a blow to US credibility, a strategic setback, and the beginning of the end of American global predominance.

My response is that this ‘evidence’ of US unreliability, weakness and failure is partial, out of context, and lacking in historical perspective. For every failure, one can point to a qualified success. These include the post-WWII fostering of model democracies in Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and the defence of South Korea from North Korean attack in 1950. Aid to Greece and Turkey in 1948 reduced the appeal of the Soviet Union. Marshall Plan aid revived war-torn economies and brought Western European states into the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO), the world's most successful alliance. Subsequent US and European ‘containment’ policies curbed expansion by the Soviet Union and induced its collapse in 1991.

Other ‘failures’ were reversed when Egypt and India realigned with the United States and US-led forces liberated Kuwait from Iran. Vietnam has begun hosting US Navy visits to counterbalance pressure from Beijing in the South China Sea. The Republic of the Philippines, whose president flirted with China three years ago, has just signed a military cooperation agreement with the US.

Furthermore, US backing has mentored the independence of Bosnia and Kosovo from Serbia. US forces backing the Iraqi government have enabled the suppression of ISIS and a modicum of

political stability in Baghdad. US troops continue to protect the Kurds and the Syrian Democratic Forces in Northeast Syria.

I predict that the governments of the West, and of the Indo-Pacific, will continue to look to Washington for partnership, material assistance, and leadership. The alleged ‘failure’ in Afghanistan will be set aside as an exception, a necessary strategic adjustment. If the US in company with the like-minded democracies can rally, consolidate, and focus, they can meet not only the threats of international terrorism but also the challenges of China and Russia, particularly at a time when both are facing economic, political, and military headwinds.

In my opinion, the end of ‘the American Century’ is not imminent. But it might better be recast as ‘the Western Democratic Century’. This would acknowledge that the US is part of a wider political community. The Biden Administration is reaffirming cooperation with democratic governments around the world, to their relief after the uncertainty of the Trump years. Many governments, New Zealand's included, will welcome Biden's promise that ‘America is back’.

Whether Biden can keep this promise despite widespread cynicism, political polarisation, and covert and overt opposition at home and abroad is the question partner governments will ask during the coming three years. In the meantime, America, if no longer revered as the ‘indispensable nation’ presiding over ‘the unipolar moment’, is still the least bad choice of partners. The American Century need not wane if American leaders can learn how to share it with willing allies and partners.

■ Associate Professor Stephen Hoadley (Politics and International Relations) has written or edited 14 books, including *New Zealand United States Relations* (2017).

The views in this article reflect personal opinion and are not necessarily those of the University of Auckland.